

# Martina Šimkovičová

## Projects - Images. Notes to the connections of projection and avant-garde art of the 1920s

### Abstract

Projection as a technical method to produce images and artworks has been existing long enough to develop certain conventions and modes of use. The invention of cinema happened almost parallel to the development of the psychoanalysis theories of Sigmund Freud. Projection became not only a word describing a technological process, but also of a mental activity, which can take place both in the artist and the spectator. Projection became also a tool for diverse artists and filmmakers of the the art avant-gardes of the 1920s. The search for aesthetics that could reflect the state of the contemporary society was paired with the striving for social change and progress, with plans, utopias, projects of a better society. Almost 100 years later, with my own artistic practice, I reflect upon the legacy of their visions and art. How far is the contemporary society dealing with the legacy of the modernity, of the striving for productivity, effectiveness and perfection today, in the, back then envisioned and now very present future?

### Key words

Avant-garde. Europe. Installation. László Moholy-Nagy. Piet Zwart. Projection. 1920s.

### Projection-ism

The word 'to project' in its usage connects both rational and irrational processes. Besides describing the actual image falling on a surface, the English word connotes preliminary design, planning, even 'causing to move forward'. David Hume's notion of projectivism dealt with the idea of attributing one's impressions to the objects themselves. As a mental process, projection in psychoanalysis denotes an unconscious defensive mechanism, where the individual displaces their own thoughts, feelings, ideas and wishes into the surrounding environment or into another person.

According to E.H. Gombrich, the process of projecting is essential to the perception of artworks. He mentions a certain gap, a lack or absence of something which makes space for the most important activity of the viewers, which he calls 'a projection.' The viewer

is therefore not occupied by an illusion, but actively engaged in constructing of an impression of the reality, guided by experiences and expectations. In Slovak language, it acquires also connotations to a thought process of reflecting about the past things. In German, the word describing this thought process even gains the name of the 'cinema of mind' (Kopfkino).

To close this circle again with psychoanalysis, it is possible to say that in this discipline, the term of projection gained a connection to the active oppositions of inner and outer, subject and object.

### Planning the society vs. incorporating the irrationality

The invention of photography and celluloid took place in the time of the final stage of industrial revolution and of the many emerging social movements in several European states and in the Soviet Union.

The potential of film and photography as a tool for informing the masses, and, eventually, propaganda, was quickly recognized. While the medium of (narrative) film was developing, searching for its own conventions of the 'silver screen,' visual artists of the concurrent avant-garde were experimenting with the editing and projection (Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp). In order to be acknowledged as an art form, the first phase of each media mentioned was marked by imitation of the visual codes of painting before media-based visual language was developed. Photography and film as products of technology were then supposed to correspond to the aesthetics of the modern man more than the artifacts of hand-made art.

Many personalities in avant-garde currents, in line with their left-wing political mindset, have rejected the label of an "artist" which they considered to be elitist. They considered themselves more closely related to engineers (Piet Zwart - 'Vormingenieur'), designers,

or "workers," who contributed to the company's change, either through social relationships or through the production of visuals and objects of daily use.

For Solomon Nikritin, the founder of the Russian avant-garde group of Projectionists (1922), painting was even subordinated to the film. The term of projection was supposed to be used in the dialectics of the society of future, without classes and authorities, not only in the visual arts. For Nikritin, the artist should not be 'a producer of the consumer goods, but of projection of the methods - organizations of matter'.

László Moholy-Nagy was concerned with theories of aesthetic possibilities of abstract and concrete projections on distorted and broken surfaces. In the text *Das simultane oder Polykino*, he considers the possibilities and limits of projection on convex and concave surfaces, in connection with a narrative. Based upon his examinations of synesthetic and multimedia phenomena and their structures, he draws deeper conclusions about their necessity for the contemporary man. "Through the tremendous evolution of technology and the big cities, our sensory organs expanded the ability to simultaneously perceive acoustic and optical functions." He, Berlin-based Berliner Potsdamer Platz, who, in addition to their own interviews, are able to withstand the noise. They hear car buzzes, ringing trains, bus tricks, cats' greetings, subway rumors, newspaper vendors, etc. It puts it in contrast to a man from a province who would find himself at that spot - and he would be driven out of the tramway by the pressure of impressions. Moholy-Nagy argues that the possibility of "constructing an analogous example in the field of optical experiences is obvious."

He gives a practical example of the modern human - the Berliners crossing the Potsdamer Platz, who, in addition to their own interviews,

are able to withstand the noise. They hear at once car buzzes, ringing trains, bus tricks, cats' greetings, subway talks, newspaper vendors, etc. Moholy-Nagy puts these people in contrast to a man from a province who would suddenly find himself at that spot - and who would be standing in the middle of the tramway tracks, overwhelmed by all of the impressions. Moholy-Nagy argues that the possibility of "constructing an analogous example in the field of optical experiences is obvious." The designer creates a court about the recipient: Modern optics and acoustics as a means of artistic creation can only be understood by man open to the present - and only then can he enrich it.

The designer draws finally in his essay a judgement about the recipient: Modern optics and acoustics as a means of artistic creation can only be understood by man open to the present - and only then can he enrich it as well.

#### Utopia and (n)ostalgia

The European modernity could be viewed as a search for productivity. Experiencing crisis in the 2000s, one of the strategies in visual arts to search in the past for the possibilities of change ('archaeologic turn?').

Contemporary nostalgia, and often ostalgia, works with a different perception of time. Today's type of nostalgia could be understood as craving for the visions of the future which have been clear - craving for the utopias of modernity. Ostalgia - craving for the former socialist establishment, respectively subjective experiences associated with it, could be also seen as a part of the concept of modernity (although ostalgia is often referred to as cultural retro-pop-production).

Ostalgia for socialist modernism, is, said with the words

of Jan Zálešák, more of a wish in the contemporary art to have some inheritance, and perhaps the future that would not be attached to a consumer society, an alternative to it.

#### Working on it: Homage to the avant-garde

...is there no dynamic man of action, the rebel, who will help determine the aspect of the collective expression of tomorrow? If you consider this question, you'll know that making beautiful creations for the sake of their aesthetic value will have no social significance tomorrow, will be meaningless self-gratification. Every era contains the conditions for providing a rebel.

(ascribed to) Piet Zwart

Inspiration for this work in progress - series of objects were the graphic and typographic works by László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky. The forms of the objects and the compositions they create merge into the space. The photographs used show architecture of 1950s-2000s in Slovakia, Austria and the Netherlands, to think of the continuity of the ideas mentioned above. The work consists of objects - assemblages from foil prints with dimensions varying from 15 x 20 cm to 30 x 40 cm and light, the installation depends on the space.

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#### Profile of the author

Martina Z. Šimkovičová works with analogue and digital photography, site-specific projections and visual environments for music performances. In 2017, she was awarded the Ernst-Mach-Stipendium (ÖAD) and nominated for the Ö1 Talentsstipendium. For her series Pressburg, she was awarded the Stipend of the City of Bratislava at the Slovak Press Photo 2013. For the artistic books Domov(ina) - Heim(at), she was nominated for the Vienna PhotoBoo Award in 2016. Solo and group exhibitions throughout Slovakia, Austria, Germany, Czech Republic. At the moment, preparing her diploma at the Academy of Fine Arts, Department of Art and Photography.





